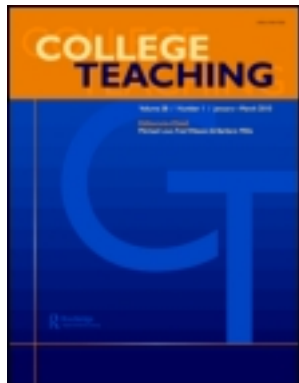


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The Dea(r)th of Student Responsibility

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THE DEA(R)TH OF STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY

Holly Hassel and Jessica Lourey

Abstract. More than eleven hundred university students were surveyed to determine attitudes toward learning and accountability. Apathy, absenteeism, and grade inflation emerged as contributing to the lack of student accountability. This article suggests institutional changes to reanimate college classrooms: explicit expectations; smaller, engaged classes; absenteeism consequences; grading consistency; elimination of the extra credit model; and reorganizing responsibility for retention and enrollment.

We are defined by what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.

—Aristotle

Around mid-semester and again at the end of the semester, there is a familiar groaning in the hallways of most colleges, and it is not from students—it is from instructors.

“My students aren’t showing up for class.”

“I see their faces, but they’ve left the building.”

“Don’t today’s students have any sense of personal responsibility?”

Indeed, anecdotal (as well as empirical) evidence demonstrates that more

than ever, students expect to be catered to, to receive a B or better for merely paying for the class and making a good faith effort. Although we do not deny the significant contingent of students with strong work ethics, intellectual curiosity, and a desire to work hard, scholarship on higher education from the past ten years has documented a shift in students’ attitudes toward college. More than ever, college instructors have reason to believe that their students are out of touch with what their grades really symbolize, why they are even in college, and what responsibilities they have as students. Subsequently, higher education faculty and administration need to make a greater commitment to elucidating both to students and to ourselves the purposes and values of a college education.

As professors of English at different

midwestern institutions, we do not pretend to be statisticians or even social scientists. This project emerged out of a common set of observations about student investment in higher education. We have several aims. First, we want to offer interpretations of the present body of sociological and educational scholarship that has addressed student responsibility in college courses but that offers a very narrow, disciplinary-specific (both in content and structure) picture of its findings. We see a need for a more comprehensive examination of student performance. Second, our project explores and reflects on the results of a survey on student accountability that we administered to 1195 students in a variety of courses at our respective colleges. We hope to paint in broad strokes a picture of the current dilemma facing many college instructors today: How do we teach our students to be accountable for their educational choices and performance? Third, we offer practical solutions to increase student accountability and quality of education.

The survey that we administered to 666 students at Alexandria Technical College in west central Minnesota and to 529 students at the University of Wisconsin–Marathon County in central Wisconsin (appendix A) and on which we report here is intended primarily to provide sketched impressions of college students’ attitudes toward grading, accountability, and perceptions of their role in their learning. We asked students to identify the meaning of

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each letter grade, articulate the kind of student they considered themselves to be, share their perceptions of student and teacher responsibilities in a college course, and identify the amount of time they spend per week studying for a three-credit college course. Furthermore, we asked respondents to characterize both themselves and their fellow students' levels of responsibility. Finally, we invited students to articulate the validity of considering attendance as part of their final grades. Ultimately, our survey was intended to uncover why we had an increasing number of students dissatisfied with their grades and to document students' lack of awareness about the rigors of academic life.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities describes the purpose of a liberal education, the kind that most U.S. institutions of higher learning strive to provide:

A truly liberal education is one that prepares us to live responsible, productive, and creative lives in a dramatically changing world. It is an education that fosters a well-grounded intellectual resilience, a disposition toward lifelong learning, and an acceptance of responsibility for the ethical consequences of our ideas and actions. Liberal education requires that we understand the foundations of knowledge and inquiry about nature, culture and society; that we master core skills of perception, analysis, and expression; that we cultivate a respect for truth; that we recognize the importance of historical and cultural context; and that we explore connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to our communities.

Matthew Arnold reminds us that the learning of letters is "the acquainting of one's self with the best which has been thought and said in the world" (1902, 34). However, since Arnold made that assertion a century ago, higher education as we know it has become more skills-based as our graduates justifiably demand that their degree make them employable as well as acquainted with the disciplines that make up the liberal arts. However, even vocational education, which traditionally has been more focused on the destination than the journey, now recognizes that skilled critical thinkers and adaptable problem-solvers are more employable than narrowly trained automata (Eklund-Myrskog 1997, 179).

An example of this is Alexandria

Technical College (ATC), which has increased its general education offerings considerably in the past five years. The college offers the full general education transfer curriculum package, which means that students could take the full requirement of freshman and sophomore liberal arts courses and transfer them to a four-year college. ATC responds to advisory committees, made up of educators and employers, who now demand that graduates have strong communication and critical-thinking skills. Essentially, they want employees who have the skills training but can also adapt and grow as technology and life demands change. The missions of liberal arts colleges and technical colleges are merging as the economy demands competent employees with the ability to think for themselves.

Yet, as society requires more of college graduates, our students seem to give less. The job of teachers is "arranging the conditions of learning" (Chickering 2000, 25), and the trademark of learning, Michael Parsons argues, is accountability to others (2000, 10). But how can we instill accountability when we cannot even get our students to the classroom, and when we do, they often "wheedle for a degree as if it were a freebie T shirt . . . [and believe] rewards are disconnected from the quality of one's work" (Wiesenfeld 1996, 16)? Dozens of researchers have addressed this very problem, but Paul Trout distills it to its essence. College students who are what Trout calls "disengaged" display a frustrating set of behaviors:

[T]hey do not read the assigned books, they avoid participating in class discussions, they expect high grades for mediocre work, they ask for fewer assignments, they resent attendance requirements, they complain about workloads, they do not like "tough" or demanding professors, they do not adequately prepare for class and tests, they skip opportunities to improve their class performance and grade, they are impatient with deliberative analysis, they regard intellectual pursuits as "boring," they resent the intrusion of course requirements on their time, they are apathetic or defeatist in the face of challenge, and they are largely indifferent to "anything resembling an intellectual life." (1997, 47–48)

What Trout describes is, in our estimation, not the result of inherent ignorance or low academic standards but the symptom of conditioning or a lack thereof.

Students come to college because they want something—whether it be a degree, a good job, or just to learn. However, many do not understand what is required to reach their goal, which leads to frustration and apathy. It is our position that increasingly, part of our responsibilities as educators is to teach students not only the content of our disciplines but also the habits of mind that will help them learn the conventions of college life, study effectively and purposefully, and succeed in their chosen fields.

A survey of recent scholarship exposes just how out of line student performance is with instructor expectations. For example, McDougall and Granby reported in the result of an informal survey that "one-third to three-fourths of community college and undergraduate students failed to read any portion of assigned readings when readings were to be discussed" (1997, 350). In a formal study, they observed that "[o]ver 90% of controls [that is, those not anticipating random oral questioning] (versus 33% of the experimentals) reported reading *none* of the assigned chapter; 70% of the controls (versus 25% of the experimentals) failed to provide even one correct quiz response" (354). In our study, 67 percent of students reported that they spend four hours or less per week studying for a three-credit course, and 27 percent of those spend less than two hours. This suggests that more than two-thirds of college students put in far less than what most faculty and administration would expect for a college-level course (two to three hours of studying for every one hour spent in class), yet more than three-quarters of student respondents consider themselves to be above-average students. If so much of the usefulness of meeting in real-life classrooms stems from an informed, lively conversation about the subject matter, the utility of course meetings radically degenerates when two-thirds of the students are unprepared to contribute to the classroom community.

Making a contribution when absent is even more difficult, yet many college students have a very different notion from faculty about acceptable levels of absenteeism. In one study, Daniel Marburger found that on any given class day, one-third of the class was absent; 79

percent of students agreed that up to six absences in a semester was acceptable; and among students with high rates of absenteeism, only about a quarter bothered to read the text to familiarize themselves with missed information (2001, 106). In our survey, despite the fact that a whopping 93 percent of students responded that they were responsible when asked “Would you describe yourself as a responsible or irresponsible student?”, 39 percent of students had missed three or more days of class by week ten of the sixteen-week semester when this survey was administered. Not surprisingly, 53 percent of respondents believed that their attendance should not be reflected in their grades.

The explanation for this ubiquitous lack of student accountability lies in many places. It begins in secondary education, where rampant grade inflation teaches students that their grades are not necessarily tied to their performance (Gaultney and Cann 2001, 84). The College Board documents this phenomenon in a 1997 study, noting that “since 1987, the population of students with A plus, A, and A minus grade-point averages has grown from 28 percent to a record 37 percent, while their SAT scores have fallen an average of 13 points on verbal and 1 point on math” (College Board). Other studies reveal that students in their senior year in high school spend only an hour per day studying outside of class and plan to spend only an hour studying per hour of class at the college level, an assumption that is reinforced when students arrive at college. Although most college instructors tell their students to expect at least two hours of homework for every hour they spend in class, the reality is that “most students are quite successful in terms of GPA while working considerably less than faculty assert is necessary” (Schilling and Schilling 1999, 4–5). Furthermore, the pedagogical pursuit of alternative forms of assessment in elementary and secondary school may contribute to lack of preparedness for modes of evaluation at the college level.¹

College instructors also contribute to the lack of student accountability by inflating grades. According to Stuart Rojstaczer, a Duke University professor, in a *Washington Post* editorial (January 28, 2003),

The last time I gave a C was more than two years ago. . . . [O]n average, grade-point averages are rising at a rate of about 0.15 points every decade. If things go on at that rate, practically everybody on campus will be getting all A's before midsemester . . . so I don't give C's anymore, and neither do most of my colleagues. And I can easily imagine a time when I'll say the same thing about B's.

At Harvard, about half of all course grades already are A or A-, and, as Dan Seligman notes, “91% of seniors graduated with honors” (2002, 94). If the direction that grades are taking at Harvard—the oldest institution of higher learning in the United States and the “jewel” of American higher education—is any indication, the future of evaluation and assessment in university classrooms is bleak. Seligman reports that “[g]rade inflation seems especially pervasive at elite institutions, where the customers have high expectations—and high tuition bills” (94), and even institutions with essentially open enrollment policies find this “consumer” model of academia problematic. As Seligman notes, “[I]n 1969, 7% of college grades were As. The figure rose to 26% by 1993” (94). While one explanation might be that students are better prepared and, thus, are earning higher grades, the lack of a corresponding increase in standardized test scores suggests otherwise.

This increase in grades without a corresponding increase in effort leads “students to believe that for a class to be considered appropriate it should not require much effort and should result in high grades for most students” (Ansburg 2001, 4). Other consequences, Clifford Edwards argues, include lower academic standards, students’ distorted views of their academic abilities, undermining the credibility of universities, and the devaluing of college degrees (2000, 540). This inflation is a direct consequence of seeing students as customers entitled to a product (credits) that they have paid for, rather than as apprentices, and the result is a weakening of standards and a skewing of instructor and student accountability. Delucchi and Smith (1997) read the erosion of the legitimacy of higher education as a symptom of postmodernism, arguing that media such as television news, documentaries, and radio talk shows have gained as much authority as

universities and that they “compete with the rationality and disciplinary standards upon which much of higher education is based. The collapse of boundaries between the inside and outside of the academy delegitimizes the belief in professors as experts, particularly as ultimate authorities on the subjects they teach” (323). With less formally vested authority, faculty need to make more explicit the value of their own education and the one that students are earning.

Inflating grades is one way that instructors undermine their own authority. However, when the number of students enrolled in a class and student evaluations can mark the difference between an instructor having a job or not, it is easy to see why many instructors resort to grade inflation. Edwards notes that “student evaluations of faculty are among the most frequently cited and pernicious contributors to grade inflation” (2000, 538), a concern echoed in Mark Clayton’s overview of the issue: “Student evaluations, many professors charge, can weigh heavily in career advancement and encourage professors to dumb down classes” (1998, B6). Greenwald and Gillmore also address the contentious debate about whether lenient grading and grade inflation have a direct relationship to higher evaluations, concluding that there is indeed a positive correlation between course grades and course ratings: “[L]eniency differences among instructors result in rating differences that should not be interpreted as indicating that more lenient graders are better teachers” (1997, 518). When students are allowed to evaluate the person grading them, as opposed to the teaching methods or value of instruction, the teaching process becomes polluted. Ineffective evaluation of teaching interferes with, rather than helps refine, the development of productive classroom practices.

Many instructors are also reluctant to require attendance or adhere to due dates because of how it may reflect in their student evaluations or how they may be labeled by the student body. The “hard” teacher may have fewer students in her classroom or program. However, accountability can be measured by presence in the class, and college instructors are implicitly or explicitly not putting

enough emphasis on the benefits of attendance. By failing to emphasize the value of attendance, college teachers obscure for students the intangible, complex, and ongoing work of education, work that may not be quantifiable. Instructors who link class attendance to grades send a message to students—learning is an interactive experience and your time in the classroom is valuable—as do instructors who are slack on attendance.

Karen St. Clair argues that attendance should not be compulsory because students must feel in control of their education and personally motivated for it to be effective; by requiring attendance, students are robbed of this valuable feeling of control: “Grades should not be used to reward or discipline students for having or not having certain personality traits, participating or not participating in class, nor attending or not attending class” (1999, 179). However, control and personal autonomy may not be the values a college education is intended to instill in students. William Cronon argues in “‘Only Connect . . .’: The Goals of a Liberal Education” that one of the “ultimate goods that a college or university should serve” is to teach students to “respect rigor not so much for its own sake but as a way of seeking truth” and to “understand that knowledge serves values” and that our responsibility as educators is to put them “into constant dialogue with each other” (1998, 6). Knowledge is not just about reading the book and being tested on it; it is the conversations we have about that knowledge that give it meaning, and the classroom setting is often the primary—and perhaps the only—place where intellectual dialogues happen. The English proverb “Education begins a gentleman, conversation completes him” articulates the relationship between intellectual development and active participation in discourse. The search for truth is infrequently fruitfully conducted in dorm rooms or video games.

The consequences of student absenteeism, in addition, have more far-reaching consequences than simply the grade of the individual student. Cronon’s assertion that liberally educated individuals “nurture and empower the people around them” argues that they “understand that they belong to a community

whose prosperity and well-being are crucial to their own, and they help that community flourish by making the success of others possible” (1998, 78). Students who miss class fail to make that very basic recognition that a classroom is a community of which they are a member; as William R. Brown notes, “when substantial numbers of students do not attend, classroom learning is depreciated, student and teacher morale suffer, and academic standards are compromised” (2002, 101). Professorial indifference to absenteeism tacitly condones the behavior. Brown calls it an “enabling circumstance” of class-cutting.

Student complaints about mandatory attendance often center on the argument “if I do well on the test, why do I have to come to class?” The assumption is that everything taught in a course is testable, measurable, and assessable. But if instructors do not articulate or even acknowledge these subtle, complex benefits of presence within a learning community, how can we expect students to do so? Of the 53 percent of respondents on our survey who believed that their attendance should not affect their grade, 422 provided comments to explain the reasoning behind their choices. The explanations broke down across the board, but a theme underlying many of them is that of commodification, exchange, and transaction. That is, students have come to understand the purposes of education in metaphors of currency—whether it is money or knowledge. Going to college is about getting a degree rather than an education. For example, a small minority blatantly spoke in financial terms, 8 percent of respondents arguing that because they had paid for the class, they should be able to decide whether to go or not. This group explicitly sees college education as a financial exchange—money for credits or, at the very least, “my financial investment in this arrangement gives me the authority as a consumer to make decisions about attendance.” These students largely ignore the fact that even if they are not directly receiving financial aid, a large portion of a public education is paid for through taxes. A large minority—28 percent—asserted that attendance should not be required, because if students can achieve a “good grade,” then why should they attend? What undergirds this assumption is the

notion that good grades are equal to learning, reinforcing Goulden and Griffin’s observation (1997) that students believe “grades do accurately reflect learning” (36). For these students, classroom education is an exchange of knowledge for a grade, a transaction between them and the professor, not a process that unfolds over the course of a semester or year, not intellectual growth or personal development.

Another group of students mentioned other obligations that sometimes interfere with classroom attendance, or specifically referred to college being “not high school,” reflecting attitudes of two different groups—nontraditional students who typically have work and family obligations (8 percent), and first-year students eager to assert their independence (3 percent). A small percentage (4 percent) believed that absenteeism would be reflected in student performance and should not be further weighted.

Those students in favor of attendance policies were not always likely to embrace a non-exchange-based model of higher education. Of those respondents who supported attendance reflected in final grades, 19 percent still seemed to embrace the grades-over-learning or “success” over education model. This group favored attendance as a part of grading primarily because they saw it as a manifestation of commitment, dedication, and the often student-hailed “effort.” It serves, for them, as a counterweight to poor performance on tests, exams, or papers. Only 17 percent of students responding to the questions believed that learning is contingent on attendance and that classroom meetings provide a forum for the exchange of ideas; this 17 percent seek an education rather than a degree. Finally, there were two small groups of students who took a more philosophical approach to the question: 3 percent attached to the notion of justice—not counting attendance was not fair to those who do attend—while a Kantian minority (5 percent) argued that “I go, so everyone else should.” At the heart of many of these students’ comments is a lack of understanding of the purpose of attending college, what education should do, and what presence in the classroom provides.

Administration contributes to this diluting of students’ responsibility to be

present for their own education. With the proliferation of independent study, flex-time,² and online courses, the presence of a teacher and the classroom interaction that had been the hallmark of traditional higher education are seen as barriers to be overcome, not as integral components. The push for larger class sizes adds to the problem. The consumer model of education erodes the need for student accountability by making instructors responsible for the number of students in their class. It is easier to rationalize a “the customer is always right” policy when your business is in danger of going bankrupt, as Gaultney and Cann (2001) affirm when they note that “if institutions and students regard universities as a provider of a service and students as consumer, then the consumers reasonably want to be satisfied with their purchase” (84). A number of scholars have refuted the superimposition of business and management metaphors and language onto higher education, rejecting parts of the analogy as ultimately damaging to quality of instruction and to social and civic values. Charles Share (1997) notes in the consumer model that assumes education is a product that “students never become full partners in the learning process,” instead waiting passively for the results of their purchase (122). Schwartzman, too, argues that there are “fundamental dissimilarities that persist between education and business despite metaphoric alliances” (1995, 17).

With all of this exhaustive research illuminating the consequences of grade inflation, the detrimental effects of inappropriate evaluation methods of teaching staff, the misplaced responsibility for retention and enrollment, and the repackaging of higher education as a business, is it any wonder that our students do minimal work and expect maximum results? More important, however, how do we effectively intervene in this decline in student responsibility and performance in higher education?

First, at the outset of the semester, if not sooner, we need to tell students what we want from them and what we intend to give them in return. Assumptions are dangerous in higher education. Although study after study indicates that students value good grades in college over actual learning, instructors assume that their stu-

dents want to learn and know that their grades reflect their performance. As Gaultney and Cann discovered in one study (2001), “Many more students in the sample wanted success (65%) as the outcome than wanted learning (35%)” (87). Goulden and Griffin (1997) confirm this disjunction between faculty expectations and students’ vision of what grades signify and their relative importance, observing that “students believe grades are the controlling factor in their present and future lives,” while “teachers deplore the student fixation on grades and value learning above grades” (27). They conclude that “teachers seemed to have a generalized skepticism toward the validity of grading, especially in regard to the ability of grades to accurately determine learning” (36). This position is fundamentally at odds with students’ perception that grades are a measure of learning. Even though students and teachers agree that “the central function of grades is to provide information or feedback about learning and achievement” (36), teachers need to make explicit how that learning and achievement is going to be assessed.

Canonical educational psychology studies, most notably Robert Merton’s (1948) self-fulfilling prophecy theory and Robert Rosenthal and Leonore Jacobson’s (1968) “Pygmalion in the classroom” hypothesis, establish that “when we expect certain behavior of others, we are likely to act in ways that make the expected behavior more likely to occur” (Rosenthal and Babad 1985, 36). Because the first semester of college sets the stage for the entire college experience, it is vital that instructors of introductory courses make clear not only what they expect but also why they expect it and what will happen if students do not meet the expectations (Schilling and Schilling 1999, 8). As Schilling and Schilling caution, “without a shared institutional understanding of reasonable expectations for student academic effort and investment of student time and effort in appropriate activities, aspirations for enhancing the impact of colleges and universities on student learning must remain modest at best” (6). This goes beyond reviewing the syllabus the first day of class. Like Carole Barrowman (1996), we believe that “[e]xpectations that remain in the hall when class begins

or are printed only on the syllabus and not discussed after the first day are meaningless” (110). Instructors need to create a job description for students, who often do not recognize that their personal standards and perception of quality are well below what is expected. A rubric like that created by Nancy Chick of the University of Wisconsin and found in appendix B, which maps out the strategies necessary for success in college courses, may remedy some of these misapprehensions.

In addition to the job description in all classes, but particularly freshman-level ones, instructors can survey the class anonymously early in the semester to determine students’ workload and grading expectations and address them accordingly, discuss the average grade distribution in the course, and invite students who did well in the course previously to discuss their strategies for success (Ansburg 2001, 10).

Once students have their job description and understand the course policies, we begin teaching content. To do this, we must make our classrooms a place where students want to be and a place they need to be to obtain mastery of the subject. Attendance has to matter, and an interactive classroom environment and collaborative in-class work are key motivators for students’ attendance. Friedman, Rodriguez, and McComb’s detailed study (2001) maps out students’ reasons for not attending class. They concluded that “the reason most highly related to attendance is that being absent will not affect their grade” (132). Although they noted that “the primary attendance motivator is internal” (130), a number of other factors are influenced by teachers. High on the list of reasons students did not attend were the teachers’ not taking attendance and not noticing or caring whether students attend, and reasons why students were likely to attend included “I like participating in this class” and “I want to ask questions in class” (132). Participation and attendance reflected in a student’s grade are two of the primary motivators for student engagement in his or her learning. If we want students to come to class, we have to make what occurs in the classroom matter—to their learning, their grades, and their understanding of education.

The consequences of absenteeism, furthermore, need to be made clear to students as well. We mean here not simply “being gone means you will lose points purely because of your absence,” but the educational research³ that has shown “an inverse relationship between absenteeism and course performance” (Marburger 2001, 99). Marburger discovered that students who missed class on the day of a particular topic coverage were more likely to fare worse on those particular questions on a multiple-choice exam, even if they had read the textbook to compensate or had gotten notes from another student, proving “absenteeism during the relevant class meeting as a significant determinant of incorrect responses on a multiple-choice exam” (100). So although instructors may wax philosophical about the intangible intellectual benefits of class attendance, students may be more compelled by statistical evidence illustrating that presence in class has a direct correlation to greater academic success.

Furthermore, class size is an essential component of student attendance. Many of the governing bodies of the disciplines that make up the university system have guidelines, position statements, and recommendations regarding class size. Studies by Marburger (2001) and by Friedman, Rodriguez, and McComb (2001) have determined that students are less likely to play hooky from smaller classes, and both the Modern Language Association (the governing body of the teaching of English and foreign languages) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) provide specific policies that recognize the relevance of class size to student learning. NCTE recommends that “[n]o more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing class. Ideally, classes should be limited to 15,” because “[s]tudents cannot learn to write without writing” and teachers cannot assign substantive, frequent writing assignments when large class enrollments make their workload impossibly labor-intensive (National Council of Teachers of English). The organization further recommends that literature classes be limited to no more than twenty-five students because larger sections “do not give students and teachers the opportunity to engage literary texts through questions,

discussion, and writing” (1987). The Association of Departments of English (the organization for department administrators) also cautions against large classes, and their recommendations for class size in literature courses concurs with that of the NCTE (Association of Departments of English). The College Art Association (CAA) states that “to ensure quality instruction in visual arts courses, twenty students or less is appropriate.” To teach students effectively, we must be able to create atmospheres that are conducive to learning and that encourage presence; smaller classes promote those values.

Next, we need to return to a system in which grades reflect student ability within specific parameters. As Riley et al. discovered, “of the 1,601 higher education institutions they surveyed nationwide, 97% used at least some form of letter grading system” (qtd. in Abou-Sayf 1996, 39). The letter grade system came into use around the turn of the twentieth century, letter grades rising out of the numerical system that was first used to represent students’ performance in comparison with other students (Cheng 2003). If 97 percent of institutions of higher education want to continue to use what Laska and Juarez explain as the comparative grading system,⁴ one that “provides two or more hierarchical categories for the formal evaluation of students” (1992, 4) and includes time limitations, then the categories need to be defined as clearly and specifically as possible and maintained. Since the letter grade has been introduced, then, an A represented excellence above and beyond what was required in the course; a B represented mastery of the course content; a C, mastery of the course content in most areas; a D, the bare minimum mastery of the content; and an F, failing.

In our study, we asked students to apply a descriptor to each letter grade and found that their definition of the significance of grades was comparable. Eighty-seven percent of students saw a grade of A as equal to excellent work, 91 percent thought a B grade signified above-average or good work, and 81 percent found a C to represent average performance. Eighty-two percent of students agreed that a D meant “bare minimum” or “passing,” and 92 percent believed that a grade of F equaled failing. What may

interest our readers is the inconsistency between the value that students attach to letter grades and the performance they believe they demonstrate. For example, while a majority of students considered C an average grade, 81 percent of students identified themselves as a B student or higher in response to the prompt “On average, what sort of college student are you?”. If 80 percent of students believe they are above average, then what does average mean to them?

Grades will always be subjective external motivators, but agreeing on what they will represent and sticking to a departmental or institutional standard is essential. This change has to be at least department-wide, because if only a few instructors grade on performance in the classroom parameters, they become the “hard” instructors to be avoided whose classrooms never fill, as Edwards confirms when he notes that “in order to protect their grade-point averages . . . they [students] avoid enrolling in courses taught by professors who have reputations as low graders” (2000, 539). Ideally, entire colleges will come to an agreement on what the letter grades stand for and stick to this.

Although instructors and, therefore, schools that come down on grade inflation may suffer initially in enrollment and student satisfaction, it is the difference between eating the chicken for immediate gratification or having the eggs for years to come. The school that turns out the more rigorously educated students will be the school whose graduates are sought by business and industry and who become more effective citizens. This standardizing of grades ultimately will positively affect student enrollment.

We also need to hold all of our students to the same high standards. There is a distinct and growing group of students who follow the extra credit model of education. If they do not do the work, do the work on time, or do the work to the required level, they believe there will always be an extension or an assignment to get their grade back where they think it should be. In our study, 5 percent of students thought that an F signifies that they need extra credit, not that they were failing. Additionally, 62 percent think it is an instructor’s responsibility to offer extra credit, and

52 percent expect instructors to be flexible in grading. In a study conducted by Norcross, Horrocks, and Stevenson (1999), faculty were five times more likely than students to believe that extra credit should be offered only in exceptional circumstances, and students were twice as likely as instructors to believe that extra credit should be offered to all students (200). Extra credit can be a positive thing when it is used as a motivator to introduce students to concepts related, but not central, to the course focus. However, when it is offered on an individual basis to students who did not meet the course standards, either in quality or timeliness of work, the playing field becomes uneven, and we are no longer evaluating all students within the same parameters, an essential component of accurate grading. This is especially evident in cases where students attempt to negotiate higher grades—revisions of work long ago evaluated, requests for extra credit—after final grades have been determined, during final week or even later.

Again, instructors are to blame for this by often making the extra credit or extra time model a reality. When writing this article, one of the authors received a call from a student advisor who was shocked because two of her advisees were not given incompletes. These two students had completed less than half of the required work at course's end because their outside commitments were too demanding, and they and their advisor assumed they could complete the work on their own time. At ATC, where there are approximately 2,100 students per semester, there were 139 incompletes (many multiple incompletes) given in the fall 2001 semester and again in the fall 2002 semester. This is a significant number of students who are being given extra time to complete work that the rest of the students were required to complete on time. Indeed, in our survey, 70 percent of respondents expected instructors to extend due dates.

This creates a twofold problem. First, in a comparative grading system, if all students are not held to the same standards in a course, including the same deadlines, the grades in that course become meaningless. Students end up being partially graded on

their interpersonal skills—their ability to dodge the basic course requirements and manipulate the instructor—and not their mastery of the content of the course or their citizenship skills. Second, it takes time to come up with alternate assignments, teach nonperforming students on an independent study basis, and change grades. This is time that could be better spent on professional development and improving the classroom environment for students who do make their learning a priority. We cannot continue to teach to the lowest common denominator if we want our students to excel.

Finally, responsibility for retention needs to be divided more equally among administration, students, and faculty. Eric Landrum's study (2001–03) considered the factors that students found the university has the most responsibility for in retaining them. Students and university personnel agreed on eight of them, most notably “good teaching,” “the quality of instruction,” “helpful staff members,” and “providing faculty who are genuinely interested in students” (201). McGrath and Braunstein concluded in their study (1997) that the two most important factors for student retention are first-semester grade point average (GPA) and students' impressions of other students. However, financial difficulties played a strong role as well. In academic situations, it is student services and admissions offices that are better equipped to identify and attend to students who are likely to face greater challenges in their first semester of study and put resources such as writing centers, tutoring centers, and advising services in place to support their academic success. In financial situations, the financial aid office is best positioned to ensure that students are in the kind of material conditions that will allow them to matriculate successfully. Faculty certainly can be held responsible for providing the “quality instruction” and interest in students that Landrum's study (2001–03) cited, but they cannot be educators when they are obligated to provide pleasing first-semester grades. A teacher cannot do her job if her goal is to keep seats filled instead of teach students.

Administration also must acknowledge the problem of grade inflation, take responsibility for it, and offer support to faculty who want to address the problem. This

includes redesigning course evaluations to focus on the purpose and worth of a rigorous education, not on whether or not they liked their teacher's personality or their grade (Fram and Pearse 2000, 42). Because some reasons that students seek higher education are to develop their understanding of their own needs and desires, to mature their reason and judgment, to nurture their cognitive abilities, and to clarify their focuses, they may “lack the expertise to judge exactly what constitutes quality in a particular subject” (Schwartzman 1995, 220). Empowering students to make evaluations that they are not qualified to make gives them a false sense of reality. Although students are qualified to make some evaluations of teaching—certainly they understand basic courtesy and professional responsibilities such as promptness, respect, and availability—other aspects of the student-teacher interaction remain more usefully evaluated by departmental and campus colleagues. We have created a constructive evaluation (see appendix C) that requires students to think critically about their learning and what value they place on it before they evaluate the course and instructor.

Change in student accountability and performance begins with the instructors, and the change has to be system-wide. We need to tell our students what is expected of them, create a valuable learning environment, tie grades to achievement, and hold all of our students to the same standards, because it is to their advantage as well as ours. We need to embrace high standards, stick to them, and impart this to our students. Administration needs to support this movement by returning instructors to the role of teachers, not small business owners. Our students are what we make them, and until all of the cogs (administration, faculty, and support staff) in the institutional machine consciously work together to execute policies and procedures that curtail ennui and encourage engaged citizenship, we cannot expect change. National transformation of higher education is unlikely to happen overnight, but it is important that the process begins now.

Key words: grading, evaluation, student responsibility

APPENDIX A. How to Succeed in a University-level English Course (Courtesy of Dr. Nancy Chick, University of Wisconsin)

Attending Class and Meeting Deadlines

- X You should be in class, on time, prepared, and attentive.
- X If you miss many days in class, expect those absences to affect how well you understand what is going on in class. Class activities develop necessary information not found in your readings.
- X If you must miss a day, get missed assignments, notes, and handouts from your study partner BEFORE you return to class to be as ready for class as students who were there. *If your study partner disappears, take the initiative and get another one.*
- X Turn in your work on time. Due dates are clearly indicated on the syllabus.

Taking Notes

- X I expect you to know what I tell you in class, even if I say it only once.
- X Write your notes legibly, in outline form, and rarely in full sentences.
- X Write down definitions, deadlines, terms to look up later, homework assignments, revisions to the syllabus, key quotes, dates, and *anything I emphasize*.
- X Actively use these notes when reviewing for discussions, papers, exams. You should also xerox these notes for study partners when they're absent.

Studying

- X . . . is not cramming.
- X . . . is a consistent, frequent, and active reviewing of notes, annotations, and readings.
- X Keep up with the readings.
- X Test your knowledge with a partner or with a study group. Education research and surveys of graduates show that informal study groups are a key to student success in college.
- X Work on long-term projects consistently (papers, research projects), rather than procrastinating.
- X Since no one is checking up on you, you do have the choice not to study, as defined above. However, expect that choice to *seriously* impact your grades. It is *your* choice.

Time Management

- X Write due dates on a calendar, and schedule times for studying, as defined above.
- X Expect to spend SIX hours per week studying, as defined above, for this course. That's two hours out of class for each one hour in class: the rule of thumb for *every* college-level course.
- X If you procrastinate or do not practice this type of studying (spending less than the expected six hours of study time per week), some weeks will require more than six hours of work. (Plus, that kind of cramming typically does not produce grades as high as the above definition of studying. Again, it's your choice.)

Reading

- X There are different ways of reading for textbooks, articles/essays, and literature (short fiction, poetry, novels). Reading essays and lit quickly does not lead to a well-developed understanding of these types of texts.
- X Annotate your reading by marking key quotes and terms, noting important symbols, jotting down questions, writing brief paraphrases (main points) of paragraphs or sections for easy review. Use highlighters sparingly, if at all. A better form of annotation is with a regular pen or pencil, underlining only the most key sections and writing notes in the margins or on Post-It Notes.
- X Always, always, always have a dictionary handy. You simply *must* look up words you're unsure about in the dictionary, or else you will not understand what you're reading.
- X Look up historical references in an encyclopedia or online.

Writing

- X Treat writing as a process of prewriting, drafting, and editing (which includes what we call proofreading), with most of the time spent in the prewriting and editing stages.
- X Think carefully about the purpose and audience of each essay before you start writing.
- X Have a clear sense of organization in your writing, including an introductory paragraph with an explicit thesis, focused body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- X Always write *formally* for a university-level English course (appropriately formal diction, grammatically correct, proofread, typed, neat).
- X Bring your work to the writing tutors in the learning lab.

(appendix continues)

APPENDIX A. (Continued)**How to Fail in a University-level English Course***Attending Class and Meeting Deadlines*

- X Be late to class.
- X Miss more than a couple of weeks of class in a semester.
- X After missing class, do nothing to get caught up.
- X Try to hand in work late, even when deadlines are firm.

Taking Notes

- X Sit back in your seat and trust that you'll remember everything said in class.
- X Take minimal notes: Write down only what I tell you to write down.

Studying

- X Fall behind on your readings, or skip some.
- X Treat your notes as a mere record of class: Write the notes, bring them to class (sometimes), and put them away when you get home. Don't look at them otherwise.
- X Procrastinate.

Time Management

- X Use only the syllabus as your calendar to remind you of due dates.
- X Spend the same amount of time working on this course as you did with high school classes.

Reading

- X Skim your readings.
- X Read without a pen or pencil in hand, and don't take notes.
- X Dictionary, schmictionary! Skip over words you don't know, and assume that if a word is familiar to you, you must know what it means.

Writing

- X Write essays the day before they're due.
- X Feel free to use slang, and write the way you talk to your friends. After all, the class is pretty laid back.
- X Don't worry about correctness or polishing your writing. Your ideas are all that *really* matter!

APPENDIX B. Student Accountability Survey

This survey will take approximately five minutes to complete. Your answers are anonymous and will be used in a study documenting student accountability being conducted by Holly Hassel and Jessica Lourey. Thank you for your time.

For each of the following, check only one descriptor.

1. An "A" grade signifies: ☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Adequate ☐ Perfect ☐ Other
2. A "B" grade signifies: ☐ Above average ☐ Good ☐ Excellent ☐ Adequate ☐ Other
3. A "C" grade signifies: ☐ Below average ☐ Average ☐ Poor ☐ Good ☐ Other
4. A "D" grade signifies: ☐ Bare minimum ☐ Failing ☐ Average ☐ Passing ☐ Other
5. An "F" grade signifies: ☐ Bare minimum ☐ Failing ☐ Need extra credit ☐ Other

For each of the following, check all those that apply.

1. Check all of the following items that you believe are a student's responsibility in a college course:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Make an effort | <input type="checkbox"/> Complete required work before an absence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Desire to learn | <input type="checkbox"/> Be motivated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Seek help outside of class | <input type="checkbox"/> Meet due dates |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Be enthusiastic | <input type="checkbox"/> Notify instructor of absence beforehand |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have good study habits | <input type="checkbox"/> Have a good attitude |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Work cooperatively in groups | <input type="checkbox"/> Attend daily |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Show respect for teachers | <input type="checkbox"/> Ask questions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Be curious | <input type="checkbox"/> Show respect for fellow classmates |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Follow directions | <input type="checkbox"/> Be open-minded |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ |

(appendix continues)

APPENDIX B. (Continued)

2. Check all of the following items that you believe are a college instructor's responsibility:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Display intellectual curiosity | <input type="checkbox"/> Teach relevant material |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Provide valuable instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> Make an effort |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Be enthusiastic | <input type="checkbox"/> Be flexible in grading |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Allow in-class work to be made up | <input type="checkbox"/> Offer extra credit |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have knowledge of teaching area | <input type="checkbox"/> Notify students of absence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Apply same standards to all students | <input type="checkbox"/> Observe reliable office hours |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Be motivating | <input type="checkbox"/> Be consistent in grading |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have a good attitude | <input type="checkbox"/> Be willing to extend due dates for all students |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Be entertaining | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Respect students | |
| _____ Other | _____ Other |

For each of the following, check only one descriptor:

1. On average, what sort of college student are you?
☐ A student ☐ B student ☐ C student ☐ D student ☐ F student
2. Do you think your attendance should be reflected in your grade in a college class?
☐ Yes ☐ No
 Why or why not?

3. How many days of class have you missed this semester?
☐ 0 ☐ 1-2 ☐ 3-4 ☐ 5-6 ☐ 7 or more
4. What percentage of your college grades do you believe that you are responsible for? (Numbers 4 and 5, when added together, must equal 100%.)
☐ 90-100 ☐ 80-90 ☐ 70-80 ☐ 60-70 ☐ 50-60
☐ 40-50 ☐ 30-40 ☐ 20-30 ☐ 10-20 ☐ 0-10
5. What percentage of your college grades do you believe your college teachers are responsible for?
☐ 90-100 ☐ 80-90 ☐ 70-80 ☐ 60-70 ☐ 50-60
☐ 40-50 ☐ 30-40 ☐ 20-30 ☐ 10-20 ☐ 0-10
6. Would you describe yourself as a responsible or irresponsible student?
☐ Responsible ☐ Irresponsible
7. Would you describe the majority of your classmates as responsible or irresponsible students?
☐ Responsible ☐ Irresponsible
8. On average, how many hours per week do you spend doing homework for a three-credit college course?
☐ 1-2 ☐ 3-4 ☐ 5-6 ☐ 7-8 ☐ 9-10
9. What program/major are you in?

APPENDIX C. Student Evaluations

For ease of compilation, students would circle where they felt this course fell on each item, A being "always," B being "often," C being "sometimes," D being "seldom," and F being "never." There is a sixth option of "NA" (not applicable).

1. I was told on the first day of class what was required of me.
2. I was required to work hard to receive a good grade in this course.
3. I completed three hours of studying per week for this course for every one hour I spent in class.
4. I feel I learned a great deal in this course.
5. The text(s) and readings were useful in helping me to learn.
6. The outside assignments were useful in helping me to learn.
7. The in-class activities were useful in helping me to learn.
8. The tests, assignments, and projects focused on the objectives of the course.
9. In class, the instructor provided material beyond that offered in the text or readings.
10. The instructor seemed well prepared for class.
11. The instructor seemed enthusiastic about the subject matter.
12. The instructor used a variety of teaching methods (i.e., small and large group discussions, lectures, multimedia presentations, etc.).
13. The instructor spoke clearly and distinctly.
14. I met all the deadlines in this course.
15. The instructor had control of the teaching environment.
16. The instructor made me feel comfortable to ask questions in class.

(appendix continues)

APPENDIX C. (Continued)

17. When I sought the instructor for help with questions or homework outside of class, s/he was available.
18. The instructor provided timely feedback on my work.
19. In this class, I expect to get a grade of:
20. If I were to grade myself in this course based on the amount of work I did, my attitude, my contributions to class, and my performance, I would give myself:
21. If I were to grade this course based on the amount of things I learned, the grade I would give is:
22. If I were to grade this instructor based on his/her knowledge of the subject matter, consistency in holding the class to the same high standards, and ability to convey information, the grade I would give is:

NOTES

1. See Juarez; Munk and Bursuck; Krogness; Black; and Culbertson and Jalongo for discussions of alternative assessment (portfolios, charting, etc.).

2. Flextime courses are enrolled as regular courses but do not meet and have a "point of contact" person in lieu of an instructor.

3. See David Romer, "Do Students Go to Class? Should They?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7 (1993): 167-74; Kang Park and Peter Kerr, "Determinants of Academic Performance: A Multinomial Log Approach," *Journal of Economic Education* 21 (1990): 101-11; and Garey Durden and Larry Ellis, "The Effects of Attendance on Student Learning in Principles of Economics," *American Economic Review Papers and Proceedings* 85 (1995): 343-46.

4. Comparative grading is contrasted with mastery grading, which typically eliminates two elements: time limitations and comparisons with other students. Because such an overwhelming number of institutions use the comparative system, our present study concerns itself with that system. We will refer the reader to Laska and Juarez's *Grading and Marking in American Schools: Two Centuries of Debate* for a more exhaustive overview of the debate over assessing and evaluating student learning.

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